



6-15-2000

eau-de-Cologne

Fran Kaplan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kaplan, Fran (2000) "eau-de-Cologne," *Westview*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol19/iss2/4>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.



eau-de-Cologne

by Fran Kaplan

My sister Ruthie drank a bottle of Chanel No. 5 cologne. She was two-and-a-half, pushed a stepstool over to Mother's mahogany dresser and helped herself to the opened bottle on the beveled glass tray. The bottle lay on its side, a few drops moistening the dresser, evidence of the happening. She toddled around, weaved in and out of the bedroom and fell into a deep sleep on the plushy carpet.

Mother lifted and held Ruthie close to her chest, kissing her head, and turning her face away when she whiffed Ruthie's breath. She called the pediatrician.

"What should I do?" she cried.

"Let her sleep it off, it'll pass through her in twenty-four hours," he said.

Her urine smelled of perfume for a week.

I cannot remember a time she wasn't talkative and hyperactive. Dad nicknamed her "Gorgeous Tornado," and my role as only child for eight years suddenly changed to big sister. Since I'd been five years old, sitting in the backseat of our car and listening to my parents argue. I wanted a sister. She'd sit close to me and share my loneliness, but I never wanted such a beautiful one.

Sunday brunch for aunts, uncles, and close friends at our apartment was as much to offer Mom's bountiful omelets and decorated trays of salads, as to view my sister who resembled the Gerber baby. Dad would hold her, tickle her chin, turn her smiling face toward the guests and announce, "You're a beautiful baby, perfect in every way." Had he ever said that to me?

I vied for the privilege of wheeling her in the stroller, its hood down to expose more of my two-year-old sibling's cherubic face.

"You may wheel her, but be careful." Mother strapped her in and adjusted the seat. I never understood what "be careful" meant, but if I entered and left the back door ten times a day, Mother said

it.

I knew I could be a better mother to her than the one we had. I wouldn't allow people to make such a fuss about her beauty. I'd emphasize her sweet disposition and easy smile. I'd let her crawl on the floor and get dirty, would not carry white shoe polish to keep her soft-soled shoes spotless, and I'd leave her hairbrush home, to enjoy her tousled curls.

The sun made my face feel happy as I gripped the buggy handle, released the foot brake and pushed my star sibling. My fingers turned white from holding too tight. I'm being careful, I thought. What if I accidentally let go of the buggy and it rolled down the steep hill at the end of the block? Just pretend the handlebar is fastened to my hand, and don't think about it.

The more I told myself to forget it, the more I dwelled on it. She's strapped in, maybe she'd enjoy the ride. I think it could be fun. I loosened my fingers, just a bit, and quickly re-clasped the roller handle. Ruthie gave me her ready smile. I pushed and let go, pushed and let go, grabbed to hold on, and Ruthie laughed each time. See, she does like it.

I let the stroller roll away to see how fast it could go. "Whee, isn't that fun, Ruthie?" I reached for the lightweight buggy as it picked up momentum. I ran faster, my arms stretching toward it. What have I done? I can't catch up.

I ran faster, losing my breath, and extending my arms until I was close to the handle, almost touching it. Reach. Grab, stop it, run faster, faster. Ruthie giggled, sucked in her breath as the wind pushed her downward and farther away. "I didn't mean to let go, I didn't mean it," I cried, running and gasping for breath.

The buggy stopped, partially hidden, into a lilac hedge. I never experienced such outdoor silence, not even a bird sang. Ruthie, please, make a



sound, please. Sweet scent of lilac blossoms filled my head as branches scraped my arms. I pushed aside the pinkish-violet plants, unbuckled my sister and held her as tight as she allowed while squirming and screaming at me like she understood what I had done. An angry bump on her forehead and three red scratches on her left cheek validated her fury and pain. I pulled the buggy, rocking it hard with my free hand, but couldn't dislodge it. I carried her home while she kicked and howled. Thankful she was alive, I felt scared and heavy-hearted at what I had caused.

I wanted to leave her at the door and run away. "My God, what did you do to her?" Mother reached for her outstretched arms.

"I didn't do anything. The wind took the buggy, I couldn't run fast enough to grab it, I didn't mean to do it." I wished Ruthie would stop crying, making it worse for me.

Mother ran the kitchen sink water and washed the scratches, Ruthie screaming all the time and Mother giving me sour looks. She took a table knife from the drawer, and pressed it to Ruthie's forehead swelling. I hoped the magic of metal against skin would take away my punishment as well. I moved closer to watch the progress.

"Go to your room, now," she shooed me away. "And stay there until your father comes home and sees what you've done to your sister. Your soul will be scattered with paprika," a saying she'd heard from her own mother when she disobeyed. I felt red-hot pepper singeing the tips of my hair and burning the bottom of my soles, wondered when I'd be able to walk again without pain.

In my room, I held steel scissors to my forehead. Its cool blades comforted me as hot tears stung my face with fear and uncertainty. Did I mean to do it?

I placed the scissors on the desk, glanced into my parents' bedroom across the hall. Assorted perfume atomizers stood on the dresser tray in a parade of tall, shapely crystals. I tiptoed in, raised a bottle of White Shoulders to my nose to breathe its gardenia scent. I squeezed the bulb to my opened mouth until its fine spray flowed to the back of my tongue and burned my throat. Its sting, like swords, brought sobs of pain as I replaced the bottle to its beveled glass tray on the mahogany dresser. I wouldn't tell anyone what I did. It would be better in 24 hours.

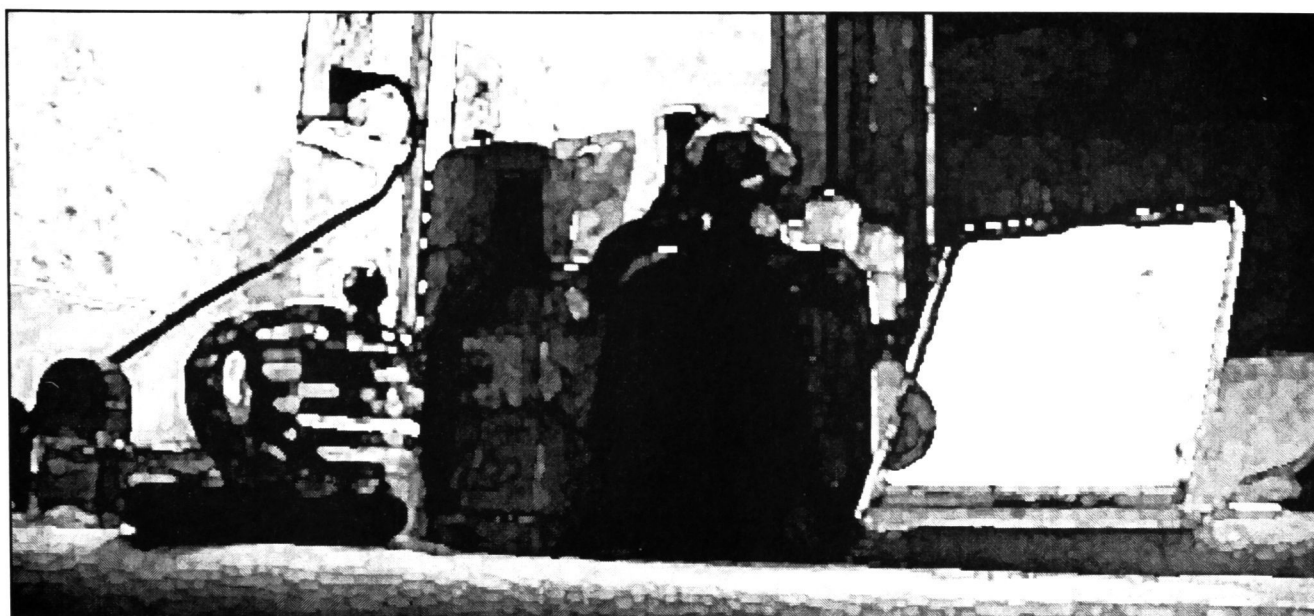


Photo by Joel Kendall

